

Safety in the Residence Halls: An Issue for the University or for Students?

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My interest in the topic of university safety came about due to my experience as a resident assistant (RA). On duty nights RAs run into issues ranging from alcohol in the hall to people passing out in rooms that they did not belong in to hate speech on dry erase boards to fights between significant others. The issues that I dealt with during my duty nights led me to wonder if am I so unlucky that problems happen only on my nights or are the halls not as safe as I believed that they were when I was a resident.

After looking at the trends reported in the Campus Crime Report I found that safety issues at Illinois State University are much larger than I had anticipated. The major issues that I came across occurring in the halls were theft, sexual assault, and some cases of hate crimes (all targeted against sexual minorities). The Crime Report showed an increase in the number of theft and robbery over the past six years. Also the issue of sexual assault is prevalent due to the percentage of cases in the dorms versus elsewhere on campus, and looking at the fact that campus includes areas directly outside of the dorms making it even more staggering. The majority of the reported incidents of safety occurred during two two-hour periods from 10pm-12am or 12am-2am. This is distressing information given that these times are directly before and after night operation's limited access process, having residents show their ID and key and to register any visitors to the dorm.

Investigating Residence Hall Safety

Illinois State University has thirteen residence halls that are divided into five areas of campus. Due to my experience I chose to focus on East Campus. The buildings have

the same basic lay out as the West and South Campus so East Campus is pretty representative of the buildings on whole. Central Campus has a different layout that requires you to unlock a door before you can enter an area with rooms, and requires you to unlock doors to each hallway. There are only three dorms in Central Campus all of which will be closed next year. The fact that the safest dorms on campus are being closed at the same time that others are being remodeled without safety changes being made is important, especially in light of recent events like Virginia Tech.

In order to determine the issues that are involved with the quality of safety in the residence halls I began by observing the night operations process. I then interviewed two resident hall coordinators (RHC). One was a returning staff member who has worked in three different areas of campus; the other RHC was new to the position and has worked in South Side. I then interviewed two resident assistants; one was a new RA in her first semester of the job, but who had lived in Central Campus for two years prior to coming to East campus. The other RA lived in East campus for two years and worked as an RA for one year. I also interviewed a night operations worker who had never lived in the halls and her only experience with the halls was through her position. From the data collected I also decided to focus on the role that marketing the residence halls plays into the rarely recognized issues of hall safety.

The Marketing of Residence Halls and safety

At Illinois State University students are required to spend their first two years living in the residence halls. This leads to the need to make the residence halls appealing to students currently in their first two years and to their parents. Part of this is done through

the mission statement, slogan, and tours that are given to prospective students. I was able to review a copy of the tour binder, which is available at every front desk, to look at the “tour guide cheat sheet”. This is a sheet of paper telling RAs what to talk about when they give tours and what to emphasize to guests. RAs are expected to discuss the job of the front desk, that residents can get mail there if they have packages and how to get a key if you are locked out, but no discussion that a resident can call the desk for help, who in turn will call the RA on duty. The RA explains that a night operation exists and that a resident will need their key and ID to check in at that time but not why the university has a night operations. The other things covered are the lay out of the room and to stress what is included in the room. These all seem like very broad things that can be found on the housing website but it is delivered to in person by a smiling ISU student that really gives the added packaging idea to the process. This furthers the idea that there is a disconnect in the information passed along to students, and whether this is done intentionally or not.

Safety issues and the flow of information

One of the major issues that came up in all of the interviews is the lack of information that the residents have and how that affects the choices that they make. The resident assistants that I talked to believe that information about problems in the halls are not easily accessible to the residents due to the lack of a widespread communication system for safety issues, or due to their perception that the administration purposely restricts communication of some issues. One RA recalled that she often felt that the lack of discussion of information, specifically incidents on her floor, during business meetings she felt that these incidents were in some way “classified” information and so she felt

uncomfortable talking about these same issues with residents. She also discussed how hard it was getting information to all fifty of her residents and making sure that they were making decisions based on the best information possible. Another residence hall coordinator said information is passed along on a “need to know” basis and explained that she tries to focus on the business aspect of the job, ensuring that everything in the hall is running smoothly through the accommodation of students, including restriction of information. The second residence hall coordinator that I talked to said he was much more “liberal” with the information that he was willing to share, and he explained that he felt that it was the job of the resident assistant to take all of the information from business meetings and from other floors and to share that information with their floors. This goes back to the idea that it is almost impossible to get the information to everyone on the floor especially those who do not come to meetings or are rarely in their rooms. This leads to the question: if the university cannot get the information to the residents are the residents then able to ensure their safety or make the best decisions regarding safety? I think that one possibility to the lack of easily accessible information is that students feel safer in the halls because they are unaware of many of these issues. This leads to students leaving doors open and other decisions that may hinder safety, but increases the self monitoring process.

Residents uncooperative, naïve or uninformed

When talking to people I found that there are not only different ideas about how the residents can improve their safety but also differing ideas about residents in general. One RHC said that one of the ways that residents can improve their safety is to make sure that they have a better understanding of the university policies and why those policies exist.

This is pretty idealistic that residents that you cannot get to walk down the hall to go to a meeting are going to take the initiative to go online to find the housing policies and interpret them and the greater implications that these policies exist and why. Knowing that residents are uninformed leads to the expectation that they are not going to take the policies seriously. The second RHC felt that the way that residents can improve their safety is to attend programs so that they can create a community and then look out for each other. He also felt that residents are naïve and think that nothing bad is going to happen to them, which leads them to ignore what they are asked to do. In an interview done this semester (2007) by my classmate Cassi Garcia, an RHC also brought up the idea that residents are too trusting and so they keep their doors open and unlocked. The idea of unlocked doors is very prevalent in the halls despite an increase of theft in the halls. Officially the University states that residents need to lock their doors for their safety but unofficially they are encouraged to leave their doors open to promote community which creates an interesting paradox for the residents. Residents, based on talking to the pro-staff in various buildings, seem almost to be responsible of their own safety and that of their floor. There is this constant idea that they should watch out for each other, which creates self-sustaining safety in the areas that the halls are lacking.

Safety and building layout

This self policing is also interesting when considering the sociological architecture of the hall. While the hall grants greater access to people coming onto the floor it also allows for greater surveillance of the floor, and has been suggested that the layout adopted to many university dorms is based off of the basic layout of a prison. The residence halls, with the exception of central campus, all have a similar lay out of a rectangular hall with

rows of rooms. While this is great for community, it also allows someone to come off of an elevator onto a floor with around twenty-five rooms. The layout of the building is an interesting obstacle to overcome and with the majority of the halls going through reconstruction now would be a great time to work on solving these problems. Talking to RHCs I found that not only are some buildings believed to be safer than others but there is common knowledge as to which are safer. One RHC told me that it is joked about at meetings that central campus are the safest buildings and they are going to be torn down and will not be replaced (hilarious). The buildings are being improved in response to fire safety with the new renovations, but it seems that basic ideas are still being left out. The RHC told me that the best thing that could be done would be to put a door in between the lobby and the elevator that you need a room key to unlock. The best explanation that I have heard in regards to the building layout and residents looking out for each other came from (2007) Cassi Garcia's interview with an RHC who said that safety violations are, "not the RA's fault, and it is not the hall coordinator's fault, it's not the student's fault, it's the building's fault." One RA described the system used in some of the U of I buildings that require an ID to swipe you into buildings and described how prior to limited access this would allow some way to tell who is coming into the buildings and ensure safety prior to midnight. Based on the campus crime report there have been issues between 10pm and 12 am so prior to night operations there is an issue that needs to be addressed.

Night Operations rants and raves

Night operations ("night ops") are an important venue for considering safety of residence halls because in every interview night ops came up as both the cause and solution

to many of the safety issues. Based on the interviews it seems that people believe that night operations have the goal of being the first line of defense for students but that it frequently is not played out that way for various reasons. Residents need to check in guests but one RHC pointed out that people stand outside and ask residents they don't know to check them in, which allows the person coming into the building the ability to wander around and do whatever they want. She also described that between 12am and 6am the residence halls are probably the safest place on campus. The RAs that I talked to all agree that it is safer in the residence halls after midnight but they question the safety of the hall prior to night operations. One RA questioned the efficiency of the night operations process and believes that they often let people in without actually paying attention to whether or not they belong in the hall. Another issue that people who are intoxicated consistently check in, then go on to floors in their hall and wander around checking to see if doors are unlocked. I asked a night operations worker what the process was for someone who appears intoxicated. She explained that if you are checking in a guest you have to fill out a check in form on that form you have to write your name. You then have three chances to fill the form out with your name printed reasonably legibly. If you are too drunk you cannot check that person in. She also explained that if someone seems drunk and is not checking someone in they may ask them to go through this same process, and if they are unable to do this they are not allowed to enter the hall. This creates a very limited protection from residents checking in guests.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From my research I found that there are many shortcomings of the ISU safety program. I think that a large part of this issue is due to the lack of information that is given

to the residents and that if they were more aware of the things that are going on in their halls they would be more willing to abide by university policies. In order to ensure that residents are informed there needs to be something beyond Community Notices, which residents generally ignore. By putting a link onto the ISU main website with information regarding safety issues and suggestions, or emailing students, I think that there could be a large improvement in safety. One of the other major issues that I found comes from the night operations process. Residents only have to write their name legibly on one of three tries in order to qualify as being sober enough to check in a guest. When looking at this as the way to get into the hall and comparing it to the number of incidents of sexual assault in the halls according to the campus crime report perhaps there should be some other process. The final issue of safety is the actual layout of the floor. People are able to walk into the buildings get on elevators and then go to any floor. By using locking doors between the elevators and the entrance or having keyed elevators, this would stop people from being in the hall that do not belong there. These are all issues that are pertinent due to the current safety problems in the residence halls. Also due to the fact that most of the halls are scheduled to undergo reconstruction now would be a good time to address these issues.